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DUTIES OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS.

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The statutes of the State of Massachusetts define only in a general way the duties of a Superintendent of Schools. They simply say that "he shall have the care and supervision of the public schools," under the direction and control of the School Committee. Nowhere in the statute-book is there given to him that authority and those strictly defined duties which are given to School Committees. In fact, it may be said that the Superintendent has no authority except what the School Committee gives him. The kind and degree of authority with which he is vested therefore depend entirely upon the kind of service that is desired of him by the School Committee. He may be expected only to see that the votes of the Board are carried into effect, and to perform certain clerical duties which it is not convenient for the members of the Board to do; or he may be called upon to render that service to the schools which the School Committee cannot collectively or individually give, and which is not given by the teachers. It is not necessary to discuss the former plan, as it involves a labor almost entirely mechanical, and cannot in any proper sense be called superintendence. It is rather the duties involved in the latter plan, or what may be called skilled supervision, to which attention is invited.

It is a most singular fact that, while the necessity of skilled supervision in all mechanical and mercantile establishments is fully recognized by all, it is not generally thought of great importance in planning and carrying out a system of education; and where the office of Superintendent is made, its duties are not uncommonly looked upon as a kind of convenience to the School Board rather than as absolutely necessary to the best interests of the schools. We do not have to go far to find the cause of a want of appreciation of the duties of a Superintendent of Schools. The business of education or teaching itself has not been fully appreciated. It is only just being recognized as an art and a science even by the teachers themselves, and it is no wonder that a work which everybody thinks himself capable of understanding and doing is thought to require no special skill of planning or directing. Assuming, then, that there is no work so difficult or so important as the training of the human mind,

let us consider the part that a Superintendent may have in that great work.

In the first place, it will be seen from the very necessities of the case that the Superintendent must have ideas, and that he must be ready to use them when and where they are most needed. He should put himself, therefore, at once into the position of an adviser as well as an executor. As an adviser he has to act directly with the School Committee and with the teachers. In regard to what should he advise the School Committee? First, and most important of all, he should advise in regard to the qualifications and appointment of teachers. If the Superintendent is held responsible for results, he should certainly have a voice in selecting those who are to carry out his plans; and if he is at all fitted for the position he holds, he should understand better than any member of the Committee is likely to understand, the qualifications necessary to a good teacher. As the schools are largely what the teachers make them, there is no more important or difficult task in the conduct of our schools than that of selecting proper teachers.

Next in importance to selecting good teachers is procuring suitable books and apparatus, and it should devolve upon the Superintendent to advise both as to the kind and amount of these necessary means of teaching.

The plan or course of study is by law to be arranged by the School Committee. It is perhaps needless to say that they will rely very largely upon the advice of the Superintendent in performing this important duty. He has, or ought to have, in mind the order and dependence of the work desired from beginning to end; and the adjustment of it in terms and classes must necessarily depend largely upon the plan he has in mind.

Important as are these advisory duties in shaping the work of the schools, those which are of an executive character are even more important; for, in the performance of his executive duties, the Superintendent comes in direct contact with the schools and teachers. Classification, promotions, methods of discipline and teaching,—in short, everything pertaining to the actual working of the school,—must receive his attention. He should not only lay before the teachers his plans and purposes, but he should indicate theoretically and practically how they may be carried out, what errors should be avoided in discipline and instruction, and what methods will best accomplish the ends desired. In all this he must not only have reasons for his criticisms and advice, but he should give those reasons at all times, always respecting the intelligence and feelings of others. No-

where are arbitrary dictation and the forcing of particular methods more improper than in the school-room. In all of his dealings with the teachers he must, in order to secure the best results, gain their confidence. He must make them feel that he is not only their director, but also their helper in all that pertains to their arduous duties. One of the best means of giving assistance is the teachers' meeting, which should be held as often as once a month, and in such divisions as will best enable him to accomplish what he desires. Instruction in general principles and in particular methods of teaching each branch should be given by the Superintendent, and if sufficient time for this is not found at the regular meetings, other times should be appointed. Such instruction will be found especially necessary for those teachers who have never received instruction in the theory of teaching. In addition to general plans and methods given at the teachers' grade meetings, it will be found necessary to supplement the printed Course of Study with certain topical details that cannot be given in a brief course. Here the danger of limiting and narrowing the teachers' work must be carefully avoided. Many of the topics may well be quite general in character, the teacher being allowed to supply necessary details. But frequently there will be weak places all along the line which need strengthening. Sometimes positive and particular directions, therefore, are necessary; and the Superintendent will find the teachers' meeting a convenient place to give and explain them.

But by far the most important part of the Superintendent's work is done in the school-room. Without an intimate knowledge of the work done there, he can neither be able to point out existing errors nor suggest needed improvements. His visits will assume a threefold character; viz., (1) inspection; (2) teaching; (3) examination.

By inspection the teachers' work in the school-room is seen. Such criticisms, commendations, and suggestions as the Superintendent believes to be helpful should be made to the teachers freely and candidly. Such corrections or suggestions as would be useful to all should be noted and made the basis of remarks at the teachers' meetings. Other suggestions may be useful only to particular teachers, and can best be given frequently by writing them in a note-book placed in every teacher's desk for the purpose. Such a method prevents interruption of the regular school-exercises, and may sometimes prevent ill-feeling by allowing time for reflection. The Superintendent may find it well, sometimes, to take one week for a single subject or a set of subjects. For instance, one week he may give special attention to arithmetic; another to reading, geography, and

history; a third to language, spelling, and writing; and a fourth to miscellaneous subjects, such as drawing, oral instruction, memory-work, etc. By this method he may be better able to compare results accomplished in the different schools and grades, and to correct the work accordingly.

Whenever a teacher or any number of teachers find it difficult to carry out any theory of teaching which the Superintendent has advanced, it is but right that they should request him to illustrate it with a class of children; and this request, if time permits, he has no right to refuse, even though the illustration be never so clumsy. Such failures in practice are a capital check upon visionary and poorly-considered theories. Or, if the Superintendent sees that a teacher is working upon a wrong plan, or upon no plan, it is incumbent upon him to give that teacher all the assistance possible,—and frequently the assistance can best be given by example in the class-room. Such assistance will be especially needed for young or inexperienced teachers, and as the teacher's ability is best demonstrated by his success in teaching dull and backward pupils, so the value of skilled superintendence is most felt in the weakest part of the teaching force.

The examinations by the Superintendent should be sometimes oral and sometimes written; sometimes especially applicable to a certain school, and sometimes uniform. Each method has its uses. By written examinations there are ascertained what all have really gained of a given subject, and their ability to put their acquirements in proper shape. Oral examinations test the amount of thought that has been awakened in the teaching, as well as of information that has been gained; while both kinds, oral and written, indicate to the teacher in a general way the direction that the work may take, and suggest to him new lines of thought. The giving of examinations "*for promotion*" I would not place among the duties of the Superintendent, for the reason that such examinations given by some one other than the teacher are both unfair to the pupils and detrimental to good teaching. Let us see how it is in practice. At the close of the year or term the questions are sent out to be given at a certain time, the results of which are to determine the pupils' fitness to be promoted to a higher class. The questions are largely upon matter contained in the text-book, or are upon information which has been given to all the pupils. If they are not thus made up, they certainly should be, for it would be manifestly unfair for children to be examined upon what they have not had, if such examination is to determine their promotion. Now who would say that a teacher can be

free to teach as he should, with the prospect of having his pupils examined periodically from the text-book? He must be more than human to withstand the temptation to load and overload his pupils with matter upon which they are to be examined, for he knows that not only the welfare of his pupils is at stake, but his own reputation as well. We ask our teachers to teach, and we should encourage them in it, and hold them responsible not merely for having certain facts memorized, but for awakening thought in the children, making them more eager and ready to receive knowledge. But this great work, I repeat, cannot be well done if the teacher is made to be in any degree a slave of the text-book. I might speak of the harm which such examinations for promotion have upon the health of children in causing unnecessary anxiety and excitement. But enough has, perhaps, been said to show why examinations for promotion should not be given by the Superintendent or School Committee.

But it may be asked, How, then, shall promotions be made? Should they not be uniform? And should they not be left to the Superintendent or School Committee? A brief statement of what is done in one town will explain how promotions may be made, and the part that the Superintendent may have in making them. Two or three months before a readjustment of classes occurs, the teacher fills out and sends a statement to the parents of all pupils who are not doing well the work of the school. This statement tells the parents what part of the work is not satisfactorily done, and asks for their coöperation and advice as to whether more work can or should be exacted from the child. This is repeated, if necessary, later in the term. Two weeks before the time of promotion the average of the monthly examinations of all doubtful pupils is placed upon paper prepared for the purpose. By the side of it is placed the result of the special examinations prepared by all of the teachers of each grade. The Superintendent, with the assistance of the teacher, then passes judgment upon each case. The only question is, Is this child ready to do the subsequent work?—that is, Will it be better for him to do that work than to go over again the work he has done? The results of the uniform examination and of the regular monthly examinations are carefully compared with the report of the teacher, together with the age, capacity, habits, and future plans of the pupil, and the decision is made whether he shall be promoted unconditionally, or be placed upon trial one month, or be expected to review the work already gone over.

There are other and miscellaneous duties, of which it is not necessary to speak in detail. Every one doubtless knows them,—adjust-

ing difficulties between parents and teachers, listening to grievances, attending to cases of discipline reported by teachers, and inspecting the school-houses and outbuildings. All these are necessary duties, and serve at least to fill up any spare time that the superintendent may have.

The question may be raised as to what part of the duties which have been outlined can be done by a Superintendent in a large system of schools. Where there are eighty or more teachers, it might be well to delegate certain duties to principals or others; where there are less than forty, the duties of supervising might be given to one who will employ a part of the time in teaching, if full-time service is thought too expensive. Or, what is much better, small systems of schools can unite and employ one competent Superintendent for the whole. The uniting of smaller towns for the purpose of superintendence is entirely practicable, and enables such towns to have the benefit of as wise supervision as the larger towns and cities have, and to have it at small expense.

There is one part of the Superintendent's work which has been somewhat neglected in the past,—that of educating public sentiment in favor of the schools; of letting the people know what he is trying to do, so as to get their support and coöperation. Public meetings should be held for the purpose of explaining methods of teaching and discipline, and for answering any questions that may be proposed. But before the community at large, the School Committee have claims in the same direction. Frequent reports should be made to them by the Superintendent of the condition and progress of the schools, and of what he is doing for their improvement. Half of the time that is now spent in committee meetings in the discussion of some trivial or personal matter may well be given to hearing from the Superintendent,—his doings, plans, and views touching any part of the school-work. Especially should they hear and heed evidence of incompetency on the part of any teacher, and his opinions regarding the remedy.

This full and explicit statement of what the duties of a School Superintendent may be is given in the hope that it will help to define those duties more clearly, and also that it will meet some of the objections against supervision. The objections to employing a Superintendent, or to continuing the office, often arise from a wrong impression of the character of the work to be done. To rightly perform his work, the Superintendent must know thoroughly the theory, the practice, and the end of teaching. He must be thoroughly in love with his profession and committed to it as a life-work. He can-

not well do the work of supervision and of anything else at the same time; but his whole thought should be given to the principles and the practice of education. Those, therefore, who are superintending schools to eke out an insufficient salary earned from some other employment, or who cannot bring to the work of supervision an undivided interest in it, should stand aside. The schools have suffered too long from poor supervision as well as from no supervision. Some Superintendents have been simply doing the errands of the School Committee, or they have spent their time in issuing bulletins of directions and examination-questions from their office, and called the work supervision. True, skilled supervision, as it exists in some places, is found to be a most valuable aid to the schools in bringing out the best results. Indeed, if every one could see the difference between the education of children where it is directed by a wise leader and what passes for education in places where there is no such leader, there would be a great uprising in favor of supervision and against the waste of the public money where there is not wise direction.

Much of the criticism that is now made of our public schools is doubtless well founded. Every intelligent test that is made demonstrates the fact that subjects are taught at the wrong time and in the wrong way. In many of the schools, original thinking is not encouraged, and the powers of observation and attention are not developed as they should be. There is not found often enough that practicalness of work which is involved in a good method of study, and which implies discipline and facility as well as the acquisition of knowledge, The remedy in part for all this lies in a thorough and intelligent supervision of the schools,—a supervision which will detect faults wherever they may be and supply the needed corrective; and there is no community in this Commonwealth that can afford to be without it,—not even the smallest town. Two or more towns can, as has been suggested, unite for the purpose of superintendence. This can be done in either of two ways. The towns can vote "to form a district for the purpose of employing a Superintendent of Schools," in accordance with Section 44, Chapter 44, of the General Statutes, or they can simply vote that the School Committee be required to appoint a Superintendent. The Committee of each town can then appoint a Superintendent for so many days' service in the week. There can be no friction between the towns under such circumstances, for the Superintendent is in the service and directly under the control of one town a given number of days in the week, and no other town has his service then. In this way each town has the benefit of the service of a skilled expert one, two, or three days

in the week, at a moderate expense. One day a week from such a man will be found to be worth far more than the full time of one who does not understand either his own work or that of the teacher.

Fear of "one man power" ought not to deter towns from securing this needed service. Nothing need be taken from the authority of the School Committee, for they will still retain, as they should, "the general charge and superintendence of the schools." Let not the excuse be made that the right man cannot be found. Once make the office as strong and secure as is that of the teacher and there will spring up many candidates worthy of trust and confidence. Neither let the fears of disturbance sometimes expressed by routine teachers prevent the appointment of a Superintendent. The best teachers hail with joy such a helper. They know that their work will be better understood and appreciated, that the plan of study will be better arranged, and that the teaching in all grades will be more thorough and methodical.